

# The Rhetorical Précis

A rhetorical précis is a highly specialized, specific type of summary. It differs from the more general summary in that emphasis is placed upon providing the *rhetorical* aspects of the work under consideration. Like the summary, the goal is to provide in clear, precise language, the main points of a piece. Essential information within the rhetorical précis includes the writer's name, the genre and name of the piece, the way in which this information is delivered, the main point, how the point is developed, and the relationship between the writer and audience. This information is presented in four very specific sentences as outlined below.

1. Sentence one provides the name of the author, the genre (essay, novel, etc.) and title of the work with the date (in parentheses), a concise appropriate verb (claims, posits, argues) followed by a "that" phrase in which the thesis of the work is stated (either paraphrased or quoted).
2. Sentence two provides an explanation of how the author goes about supporting his/her thesis. (Remember that brevity is important—you will not restate the details from the work, but explain the rhetorical method used by the writer to develop these supports.
3. Sentence three states the purpose of the piece (which may reflect the thesis, but should also include the writer's motive—why is she/he writing this piece?) This is accomplished with an "in order to" phrase.
4. Sentence four explains the author's intended audience and how the author positions his or herself with that audience.

For our class' purposes, you are to follow this four-sentence paragraph with a response paragraph. In this, discuss how successful you found this piece to be based upon the writer's use of language, style, and rhetorical appeals.

You should also provide a full bibliographic citation of the piece at the top of your paper, follow MLA formatting rules, and adhere to the policy outlined in the course syllabus for handing in précis

- Using Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech write a rhetorical précis. See the model attached.

## **Précis Example**

Turkle, Sherry. "Cyberspace and Identity." *Writing and Reading Across the Curriculum*. Ed.

Laurence Behrens and Leonard J. Rosen. 8th ed. New York: Longman, 2003. 271-280.

In her essay "Cyberspace and Identity", Sherry Turkle argues that "today's life on the screen dramatizes and concretizes a range of cultural trends that encourage us to think of identity in terms of multiplicity and flexibility" (272). Turkle supports her assertion by juxtaposing theories of cyberspace and identity formation with older understandings of identity found in psychology, sociology, and philosophy. Her purpose is to show readers that theories on cyberspace and identity, which claim that identity is multiple and cyclical, do not overturn, but rather add to our understandings of identity in order to encourage her audience "to rethink our relationship to the computer culture and psychoanalytic culture as proudly held joint citizenship" (278). Turkle's tone assumes a highly educated audience who is familiar with theories not only of cyberspace and identity, but sociology and psychology as well.

Turkle is one of the leaders in the discussions of identity and cyberspace. Her tone is appropriately scholarly for her intended audience. Because I have studied works by Turkle before, including her seminal piece from 1984, I had a better understanding of the theories she was referring to, and at times challenging. For the novice reader, however, I can see that this would indeed be a very taxing read. Still, Turkle's well-organized essay, which provides everyday examples, can be understood by the careful reader, even if he or she does not fully understand all the theory and knowledge that is assumed by Turkle.

## The Rhetorical *Précis*

**Q:** What is a Rhetorical *Précis*?

**A:** A Rhetorical *Précis* is a highly structured four-sentence paragraph that records and describes the essential elements of an essay, including: the name of the speaker/writer, the context of the delivery, the major assertion, the mode of development and/or support, the stated and/or apparent purpose, and the relationship established between the speaker/writer and the audience. Each of the four sentences requires specific information. You are also encouraged to use brief quotations to convey a sense of style and tone.

**Q:** How do I construct a Rhetorical *Précis*?

**A:** Each sentence of the paragraph should contain the following information:

**FIRST SENTENCE:** This should contain name of the author(s) [optional: a phrase describing the author(s)], genre, title of work, and publishing date in parentheses (additional publishing information in parentheses or on "Works Cited" page); a rhetorically accurate verb (such as "asserts," "argues," "suggests," "implies," "claims," etc.); and a "that" clause containing the major assertion (thesis statement) of the work. Think of it this way: WHO is the author talking about? WHAT is his or her background? WHAT did he or she write? WHAT year was it published? WHAT is the author's point?

**SECOND SENTENCE:** This should be an explanation of the evidence and development the author uses to support the thesis, usually in chronological order. Think of it this way: HOW does he or she prove the thesis — through interviews; official data; other outside sources; anecdotes?

**THIRD SENTENCE:** This should be a statement of the author's apparent purpose (authorial intent) followed by an "in order to" phrase. Think of it this way: is he or she trying to entertain you; trying to persuade you to feel a certain way; trying to change your mind about an issue? Is he or she trying to inform you — sharing information that teaches? WHY is that the author's purpose; in order to accomplish what?

**FOURTH SENTENCE:** This should be a description of the intended audience and/or the relationship the author establishes with the audience. Think of it this way: WHO is the author trying to address? For example, is he or she talking to teachers, or parents, or senior citizens, or Latinos, or Muslims, or registered voters? It could be anyone. You need to determine if the audience is addressed formally (through use of academic language, proper English) or informally (a more conversational tone, use of slang, etc.).

**Q:** Does the *précis* need to be MLA formatted?

**A:** Yes, your *précis* should be formatted according to MLA rules, including creating a "Works Cited" page.

---

**Here is a sample Rhetorical *Précis*:**

Student

Teacher

Class

Date

13 August 2009

In the article “End Homework Now” (2001), Etta Kralovec and John Buell **claim** that the practice of assigning homework is not an effective teaching method because its negative effects outweigh its **benefits**. Kralovec and Buell **support** their claims by providing examples of how homework disrupts families, overburdens children, and limits learning; and while dispelling myths about the benefits of homework, the authors provide alternative practices that would lead to improvement in student **achievement**. The authors’ **purpose** is to make the reader question a practice that is a trademark of the U.S. education system and decide whether it is conducive to creating a “smarter” student. **They seem to be speaking to** the entire educational community: administrators, teachers, students, and parents.